Files Show Hoover Sought to

3/10/78

By Rob Warden

Special to The Washington Post

CHICAGO — FBI files reveal that the late J. Edgar Hoover ordered the bureau's Chicago office to develop measures to "neutralize" black comedian Dick Gregory—and suggested that the measures could include alerting La Cosa Nostra to verbal attacks Gregory made on the crime syndicate.

In a confidential memorandum dated May 15, 1968, Hoover wrote Marlin W. Johnson, then special agent in charge of the Chicago FBI office, that Gregory had been quoted the previous month as saying, "Syndicate hoods [are] living all over. They are the filthiest snakes that exist on this earth."

"Consider the use of this statement in developing a counterintelligence operation to alert La Cosa Nostra (LCN) to Gregory's attack on LCN," Hoover instructed Johnson in the memorandum. "It is noted that other speeches by Gregory also contained attacks on LCN."

The memorandum is among 13,000 pages of FBI files released in response to a Freedom of Information Act request for documents concerning FBI counterintelligence measures against black Americans in the late 1960s.

FBI "Cointelpro" files made public last November have detailed a 1956-1971 campaign of harassment and disruption of black groups, as well as socialists, the Ku Klux Klan, war protesters and Mexican Communists.

Nothing in the 13,000 pages just released indicates what, if anyhting, Johnson did in response to Hoover's suggestion.

Johnson, now an executive with Chicago-based Canteen Corp., says he doesn't recall the memorandum. "I don't remember anything, and even if I did I couldn't say anything because I'm still bound by my oath of office not to disclose anything we did," Johnson said. "But I sure recall nothing. There would be no reason to. It's a long time ago—10 years."

Gregory, who gave up the nightclub circuit for lecturing at colleges when he left Chicago in 1973 to live in Plymouth, Mass., was shown the memorandum during a brief layover at O'Hara International Airport. He shook his head and, after a long pause, said, "Oh God, this is just incredible."

He sat down, read it over and over, and then added, "Do you realize what you have here? This piece of paper has the director of the most powerful police agency in the history of this planet proposing to contact this Mafia so they could work together.

"Instead of being outraged at what I said, Hoover should have given me a medal."

Three weeks before Hoover wrote the memorandum referring to La Cosa Nostra, the files show, he sent another memorandum to Johnson saying, in part:

"Chicago, as office of origin on Richard Claxton Gregory, also known as Dick Gregory, should develop counterintelligence measure to neutralize him. Gregory has traveled all over the country preaching black nationalist extremism, hatred and violence.

"Gregory uses his reputation as a . . . comedian to insure his vitriolic statements are reported by the press. He has made personal attacks on the President of the United States and the director of the FBI and on FBI agents.

"Chicago should review Gregory's file and his current activities to develop counterintelligence designed to neutralize him. This should not be in the nature of an expose, since he already gets far too much publicity. Instead, sophisticated, completely untraceable means of neutralizing Gregory should be developed."

Gregory, now 46, says the charge that he preached black nationalistic extremism, hatred and violence is "the most absurd statement imaginable."

"I was making lectures on college campuses—and colleges don't pay you to preach violence and hate," he

'Neutralize' Black

said. "I've always advocated nonviolence, in everything I ever said or wrote. I've become a vegetarian not for health reasons but for moral reasons—because I don't believe animals should be killed.

"What I was saying was that one day we were going to find out that one of the most dangerous men in this country was J. Edgar Hoover and we would probably find out that Lyndon B. Johnson was one of the worst tyrants. I was telling how Hoover and FBI agents were gathering sex data on people."

The only other document referring to Gregory in the files released by the FBI is a July 2, 1968, memorandum from Johnson to Hoover saying, in part: "The Chicago office has organized a counterintelligence 'team,' . . . [which has] devoted considerable effort to methods of inhibiting the effectiveness and credability [sic] of Gregory. His file has been thoroughly and exhaustively reviewed to this end.

"The possibility has been noted that, in the final analysis, an individual such as Gregory, so prone to erratic statements and action, to such wild and obviously ridiculous charges will in all probability destroy his own influence in this field and serve as a self neutralizer."

Whether a program to "neutralize" Gregory was in fact developed is unknown. For "national security reasons" the FBI withheld some 200 pages of requested documents—pages that might answer the question.